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Colombian Opium Poppy Cultivation Increasing [redacted]

Scattered opium poppy cultivation in Colombia has been reported since the late 1970s, but [redacted] indicates that opium cultivation may be expanding to more significant levels. The reasons behind this development are not yet clear. [redacted]

The First Signs

Since the late 1970s there have been several, mostly unconfirmed, reports of opium cultivation in widely scattered areas of Colombia. Other reporting suggested that Mexican traffickers came to Colombia during the late 1970s and again in 1988 with seed and technology for poppy cultivation. [redacted]

The opium plant can be grown throughout most of Colombia. Only the immediate Atlantic and Pacific coastal areas and the higher elevations of the Andes are not agronomically suitable for poppy cultivation. Optimum conditions for poppy cultivation are found along the slopes of the Andes between 1,500 and 3,000 meters elevation—areas with fertile soil, adequate rainfall, and favorable temperatures. Poppy in Colombia can be grown as an annual plant with about a four-month growth cycle, permitting three crops per year from a single field. We believe that the profits from such a cultivation cycle are almost certainly greater than those realized from the perennial coca crop, which requires a much longer term investment. [redacted]

Evidence of Expansion

[redacted]

- To achieve a four-month, three-harvest-per-year growing cycle, at least some growers in Colombia are transplanting poppy seedlings into fields from nurseries instead of simply broadcasting the seed directly into fields as is done in most other countries. This technique of poppy cultivation significantly shortens the time required for planted fields to reach maturity.

- Growers [redacted] also are reportedly staggering plantings so that harvesting occurs throughout the year, producing a nearly continuous supply of opium. [redacted]

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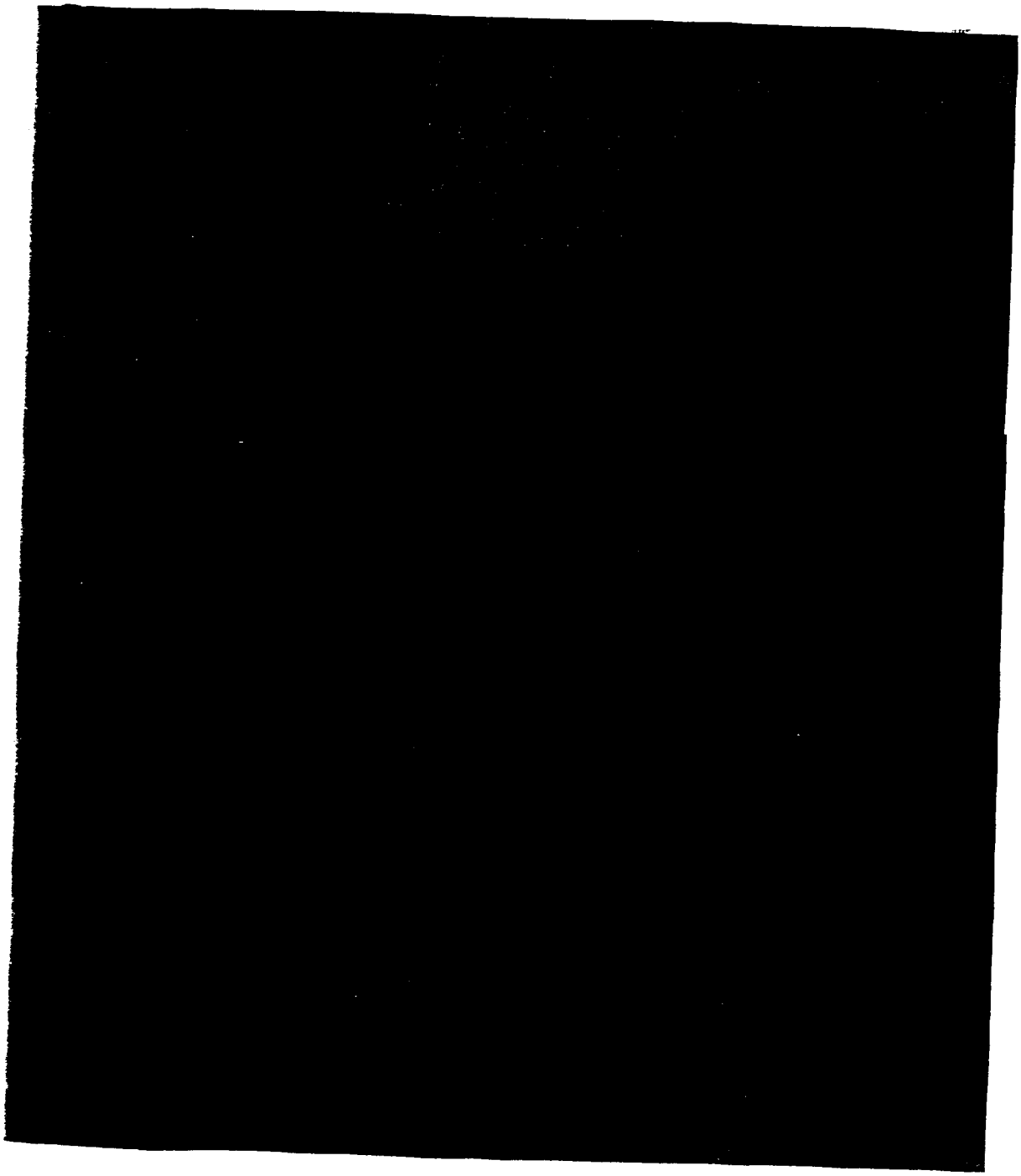

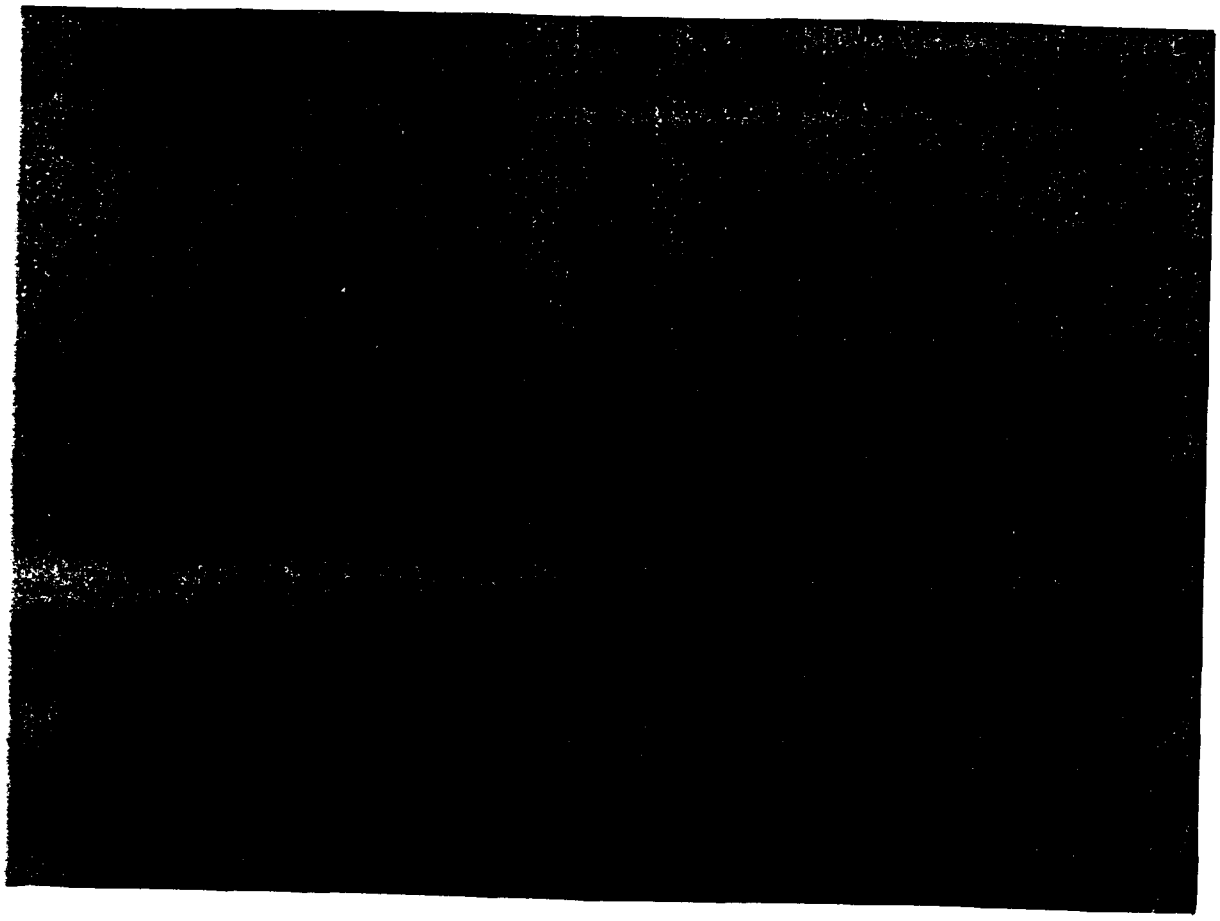

Major Drug Groups Involved

Groups previously focused on the cocaine trade, including some from Cali and Medellin, are getting into the heroin business. [redacted] Cali- and Medellin-based traffickers are encouraging some farmers to switch from licit crops or coca to opium poppy. [redacted]

may be cultivating poppy and processing heroin. [redacted]

While the reasons for this growing interest in heroin are not yet clear, we suspect that some Colombian cocaine traffickers are seeking to diversify their businesses. A number of today's large cocaine smuggling groups started in the 1970s by trafficking in marijuana, and as interdiction and eradication pressures built

up against that trade and the US cocaine market exploded, cocaine emerged as a more lucrative market. While cocaine trafficking groups operating out of Colombia are not presently under severe pressure, a source with access says that a variety of traffickers now realize the enormous profits inherent in the heroin trade. [redacted] a kilogram of heroin sold for as much as $240,000 on the US wholesale market in 1990, six times the highest reported wholesale price per kilogram for cocaine. Some groups reportedly are shipping heroin in small quantities to the United States or Europe, where it is distributed through existing cocaine networks. We speculate that the Colombians may also be diversifying into heroin in response to reports that demand for cocaine is declining in the United States and that some crack users are using heroin in tandem with that drug.

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[redacted]